

## BIBLICAL VALUES AND MULTI-RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL: PROBLEMS AND PROPOSALS

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### Abstract

*This paper focuses on an apparently inherent contradiction between the concepts 'biblical values', 'Christian values' and 'multi-religious education' in their application to a primary school situation. Some problems related to these concepts are discussed and it is argued that the existence of different value systems in a school community necessitates a special approach in drawing up curricula and implementing them in multi-religious schools. Tentative proposals are made in this regard in order to provide perspective on a newly developing situation in South African school environments.*

### 1. Introduction

The concept 'biblical values' seems to be problematic in several ways. The question may be raised whether there is a difference in meaning between concepts such as 'biblical values' and 'Christian values'? A distinction needs to be made between the terms 'biblical' and 'Christian', and the term 'values' also needs to be clarified. Strommen, in defining the term 'values', states that:

Values are how we grasp the mixture of good and evil in any combination of circumstances involving interaction between ourselves and external reality. (Barber 1984:13)

From this it follows that values are formed from the lifestyle of a community and can be transferred from one generation to another without explicit teaching. Values can also be formed from personal or communal experiences. Experiences from the past emphasize a specific code or value system with a specific meaning. This implies that a specific set of values within a particular community or nation may differ from that of another community or nation. Values imply the attainment of specific life goals; goals which are promoted successfully from one generation to another. The way of teaching or facilitating values will therefore differ from one culture to another. In for example African tradition values were experienced or taught to children 'in the most informal, serene and unruffled way' (Boateng 1982:325).

A value system normally constitutes the basis for behaviour of an individual, a community or of a society. On the other hand, it also seems as if values within a community or nation may also be 'general' without being too specific. Most, perhaps all, valuable objects can be brought under some general value principle which holds for virtually all human beings everywhere. (Beck 1974:255)

However this does not mean that all values are universal. In for example a school community a 'general value principle' can only be understood if the child's own value system is clarified. New or general values have to relate to what children understand from their own community and / or value systems.

## **2. Biblical and Christian values**

The concept 'biblical values' refers to values originating from a specific source - the Bible in general. This implies support of a value system vested in the biblical understanding of specific values, e.g. its understanding of love, obedience, caring, etc. 'biblical values' may be thought of as values of behaviour and ethics based on incidents and actions of persons portrayed in the Bible. Examples of values are taken from the Old and New Testament. However, some examples from the Old Testament as well as the New Testament may no longer be applicable in modern Christian society as customs and behaviour have changed. The problem, in essence, revolves around the concepts 'historical biblical values' and 'Christian biblical values'. 'Historical biblical values' refer to customs and behaviour of historical Israel as depicted in the Old Testament and New Testament. The question naturally is whether all of these values are equally applicable to a child of the Christian faith in contemporary society?

'Christian biblical values' may be defined as values originating from the Bible, being the direct result of the Christian religious belief system. As such these values are based on examples of Christian ethics and behaviour. The words and work of Jesus Christ should be the origin of a Christian value system. The preaching and examples of behaviour of Jesus Christ differ from historical biblical ethics embedded in historical Israel's faith. Christ proclaimed a new set of values for his followers. This value system should be based more on the ethics, preaching and behaviour of Jesus Christ and for example on the letters of Paul (interpreting Christ), rather than on the behaviour and ethics originating from historical Israel (e.g. certain laws from Exodus, versus the interpretation of Colossians 3:12-15; or the stories of David or events from the early Christian church).

It is important that, in introducing a value system to a child of the Christian faith, more emphasis should be placed on the term and meaning of 'Christian values' than on 'biblical values'.

One's personal value system is fashioned by modifying the values that one has unconsciously and uncritically absorbed from the community in which one has grown up, as the results of transcendental experiences which have conditioned what one thinks to be ultimately real and significant. (Cox 1987:14)

The mysteries and transcendent realities of values embedded in religions make value systems more complex. The view is held that value systems in different religions originate from a godly power. These are timeless values and reflect belief in an absolute, which are not the ideas or behaviour of the human intellect. These values are the result of reflection over a period of time. The experiences from a faith appear to be 'self-justifying to individuals, or taken as authentic by communities of believers' (Plunkett 1990:90). Craig Dykstra, for instance, regards values from a Christian perspective as follows:

The Christian view is that transcendent centres of value are not only somehow there to be contemplated; they are unified in one Person, an active Power. The Good is not only a value, it is a force. (Barber 1984:16)

The question to be asked is whether God is a creative entity who creates values or whether values also change because of human behaviour? In previous definitions it is suggested that values change due to new experiences and that values are constantly shaped by the minds of individuals. The question is whether the link between religious values (e.g. Christianity) and the value system in the community is clear and whether it also exists in the schools of the community? Does a society have only one set of values? It may occur that the value systems of some communities and their religious values are not clearly definable. This

is borne out by the fact that some religious education curricula in our schools are in conflict with value systems of different Christian and cultural groups in our society. The reality in South Africa is that schools are pluralistic with different Christian and/or other religious and cultural groups. There is for example no emphasis on traditional African education, where 'children's beliefs and acceptance of morals drawn from legends, proverbs and initiation ceremonies were reinforced by practical examples in adult life relative to the norms of the societies'. (Boateng 1982:334). There is a need for a more openness towards different cultural and religious value systems. The emphasis therefore, on biblical or Christian values within the school, as the only value system that prevails, is extremely complex and even unfair.

### **3. Religious education / Bible education and values**

The introduction of a value system is extremely important in the education of children, and the sooner it commences the better. Religious education has been compulsory by law in most South African schools for at least the last three decades. In practice Christian values were promoted in Bible Education classes. The successes of these activities, however, are open to question. The question may be put whether the attested breakdown in ethics in sectors of the South African community, specifically regarding violence, honesty, responsibility, neighbourly love, etc., could or should not have been countered by Bible education? How many children really live up to the values they have been taught at school?

Today there is a tendency to introduce new types of programmes - programmes aimed at developing values through 'life skills'. Some of these programmes are aimed at replacing Bible education as it has traditionally been known. It is, however, to be doubted whether the introduction of life skills programmes will solve the problems and remedy the failures of Bible education in the past. The problem rather seems to lie in the manner in which the subject has been presented in the past and the emphasis that has been placed on broad biblical values, rather than on specific Christian values for Christian children.

### **4. Multi-religious education and values**

In the event of Bible education promoting Christian values, the question may be raised as to which values are to be promoted in multi-religious education? In practice it appears as if the values of the specific community remain dominant. This seems to be particularly true in a country such as Britain, where a strong tendency remains towards the promotion of Christian or biblical values in multi-religious education:

The ethical dimensions of religions other than Christianity seem often to be neglected in religious education courses, implying that only Christians care or possess consciences! Not surprisingly, kind Jews or Muslims have been told, 'You're a real Christian!' (Cole 1988:85)

The promotion of values within multi-religious education obviously calls for a specific set of shared values, and not values originating from the one or other specific religion. However, having said this, it is equally important that a child should be fully aware and understand the values and value system of his or her own religion before the introduction of a 'new' set of values. Fostering the values of this own religion or community surely is the task of the parents and of the religious community at large. It is also imperative that, in the presentation of these shared values in a multi-religious classroom, a child should never feel threatened or uncomfortable in any way whatsoever when the teacher deals with it. This

naturally places extreme responsibility on the teacher and taxes his or her knowledge of the subject.

## 5. The primary school child and values

### 5.1 Research project

In order to gain some insight into the problem of different value systems which may prevail in a multi-religious education class, a research project was undertaken in multi- and mono-cultural schools in the Western Cape area of South Africa. The project was conducted over a period of twelve months in primary schools involving a total of 350 children. Approximately 90% of these children were Christians, although from different denominations.

The hypothesis was tested that the implementation of multi-religious contents by means of a specific didactic approach could enhance the children's understanding of their own religion and lead to a strengthening of their own belief and value systems.

Curricula for multi-religious education from different countries were analysed after which a new curriculum was created to fit the aims of the project, as well as the religious situation of the region. Specific religious themes (with multi-religious content from Christianity, the Jewish faith and Islam) were chosen and introduced by means of an innovative didactic approach. For a discussion on the project and the proposed curriculum for the school subject Religious Studies see Roux & Steenkamp (1995:73-96).

Children's religious developmental stages (cf. Roux 1988; 1994) were analysed prior to the introduction of multi-religious instructional materials. After presentation of the lesson by students trained in an alternative didactic approach, another evaluation session with the children took place under the supervision of the project-leader. In this session the children's religious perceptions, knowledge, background, fears, tolerance levels and changes in views on values (if any) were discussed in more detail. These analyses indicated a significant correlation between the child's religious developmental stage, religious experience and perceptions towards the understanding of multi-religious contents and values.

If a multi-religious education curriculum has the aim of promoting mutual values, it is equally important (as in the case of different religious perceptions) that children's perceptions of other value systems should also be taken into consideration.

### 5.2 Problems in understanding mutual values

The contents of the lessons on values were taken from the three religions in the region. One of the values that was introduced to the children was: 'to love thy neighbour'. To determine the nature of prior knowledge, the phrase as a whole as well the meaning of the words *love*; *neighbour* and *deeds* was put to the children. Children from different religious groups invariably came up with answers which clearly indicated that their understanding of the value originated mainly from home or from the community in general, rather than from previous experiences in religious education classes. However a few Christian children did identify the value 'to love thy neighbour' as a 'Christian' value, not because it originated from the Bible or a Bible narrative, but because 'Jesus asked us to do so'.

In introducing a 'new' mutual value directly from the Bible or the other religious books (the Torah or Quran), children could not relate to the value or the contents due to difficult the style and the nature of religious language. However, most children could relate to the value only when it was presented in a narrative form. The fact that children with at least six years' experience of Bible education could not identify a biblical value is of great concern.

Another problematic aspect in the understanding of values concerns dogmatic approaches by teachers. Teachers namely tend to convey their personal views on values to children; however, as long as this does not hamper the child's development and understanding of the value system within his own religious community, it is not necessarily harmful.

Clarifying the aims for a general study of Religion requires differentiating between the study of value-sensitive content and the concept inculcating values. The classroom study of religion is open to the study of values; students may clarify their understanding of issues and may reflect on what the values might mean to them. (Crawford 1993:91)

Due to a lack of knowledge about the different value systems in other cultural and religious groups in South African schools, it proved to be rather difficult to ascertain a set of 'mutual values' *per se*. Christian children found it difficult to believe that a value such as respect for another person's belongings is also to be found within other religions and non-Christian communities. This is particularly true among first and third world cultural groups. Young primary school children from all cultural groups were more concerned in understanding their own belief and value systems than was the case with older, secondary school children (a project finalized in November 1994). It seems that the implementation of a 'nurturing' or 'foundational' stage in religious and value education will be of the utmost importance to assist young children from a specific religion to come to grips with their own value system. This 'nurturing' or 'foundational' stage may then be followed by a multi-religious approach where 'mutual' values may be introduced.

Children from the Christian faith, in the age group 10 to 12 years, showed an interest in other religions and communities' value systems. However, a lack of knowledge of their own religious value system, eventually hampered them from taking part in class discussions. A feeling of fear (due to a lack of knowledge of their own religion and value system) created intolerance towards children from other religions, specifically when a value system appeared to be threatening their own traditional values and ideas (cf. Roux & Steenkamp 1995).

### 5.3 Proposals for introducing mutual values

In introducing 'new' or 'mutual' values to primary school children a few factors should be taken into consideration which may help to overcome some of the above mentioned problems:

- (i) Values should be introduced in an indirect manner to small children, for instance by referring to the aspects of the lifestyle and behaviour of specific religious communities and to ethics from the religions. A direct approach, i.e. by reading directly from different religious books, including the Bible, is problematic as language style is often very difficult and religious contents may not be easy to comprehend.
- (ii) The teacher should take all the potentially different value systems in the classroom into consideration in identifying and presenting a mutual value. This means that value systems from different cultural and religious communities should be taken into consideration within any value-orientated curriculum.
- (iii) A dogmatic approach to values from any specific religion needs to be avoided. Values from different religions may be presented as sets of values that are equal with little or no emphasis on differences. The emphasis should be on the 'mutual' value it represents.

- (iv) The responsibility implied by values in any religious community or in any religion should be emphasized. Research done by Tamminen (1991) indicates that the understanding of ethics (values) by children and the responsibility that accompanies it mostly have a specific religious base. The connection between religiousness and an emphasis on ethical responsibility as well as ethical norms is partially, but not totally, explained by the fact that in Finnish schools ethical education is usually given in connection with religious education and mainly on a Christian basis. Tamminen (1991:295)
- (v) The purpose of the narrative in the Old Testament should be explained in the curriculum. If there is any doubt about applying a biblical narrative to emphasize a value, this approach could be dropped from the religious education school curriculum. An alternative approach, for instance experiencing Christian values, would probably be more successful.
- (vi) Biblical values should be seen in perspective within the broader Christian community, i.e. with the inclusion of all Christian denominations, in order to arrive at a set of 'mutual' Christian values. It is imperative to identify those values which are relevant in modern times as these values eventually form part of the value system of Christian children. It is important that the child should have a value system originating from his religion and religious community in order to understand the pluralistic (multi-religious) community in which he or she lives.

## **6. Conclusion**

From the results of the investigation it appears as if children from religious communities in which religious experiences play a prominent role, and in which values are clearly defined, were able to handle other value systems in a very rational manner (Tamminen 1992). The results also indicated ignorance about other denominations, religions and/or cultural values, and this more than often led to other values, etc. being regarded negatively. In many instances it was clear that children merely echoed the ignorance of parents, specifically regarding Christian values. Ignorance at this level may possibly create tension within the home, school or community.

In introducing multi-religious programmes and curricula, it is extremely important not to misjudge the child's ability to cope with such 'new' information. In order to understand and appreciate mutual and even other values, it is of the utmost importance that the child is totally at ease within his or her own value system. Hence, the implementation of a 'nurturing phase' prior to the implementation of any multi-religious programme seems to be of the utmost necessity.

Descriptive morality is whatever people do. Our perspective on morality is whatever a people's story, pattern of interactions and way of life are. The special focus of morality is on what is desirable, valuable, good or right. (Miller 1987:184)

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